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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Bridging Digital Media Proficiency and Media Literacy: A Study of Communication Students at the University of Sharjah

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
  *Corresponding Author:	This study investigates the relationship between digital media proficiency and media literacy among communication students at the University of Sharjah. Media literacy, encompassing the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, create, and engage with various forms of media, involves not only technical competence but also critical thinking regarding the content, ethical considerations, and cultural implications of media consumption and production. The study assesses the students' level of digital media proficiency and explores its correlation with their media literacy. By examining this connection, the research aims to evaluate the preparedness of communication students to navigate the complexities of the digital media environment and offers insights into strategies for enhancing media literacy within academic curricula. The authors adopted a quantitative approach using the survey tools. The sample consists of 285 respondents out of 1038 students enrolled to the college randomly chosen to answer the questionnaire (27.45%). The findings of this study reveal that students at the College of Communication at the University of Sharjah possess a high level of digital media proficiency, reflecting strong technical competence. Additionally, they demonstrated a solid understanding of the requirements and skills necessary for engaging with digital media. The study also identified a correlation between the students' level of digital media proficiency and their awareness of digital media concepts, highlighting the impact of these skills on enhancing their overall media literacy. Based on these results, the study recommends emphasizing the development of digital media skills among students, as improving technical proficiency contributes to their ability to analyze, evaluate, and understand the ethical and cultural implications of media content. Furthermore, the study suggests leveraging digital transformation initiatives within communication programs to raise awareness among students about the importance of digital media skills and their role in enhancing media literacy, ultimately preparing them to navigate the complexities of the digital media landscape.

INTRODUCTION

In the digital age, the ability to navigate and critically engage with media has become a fundamental skill, particularly for students in communication fields. Digital media proficiency, which encompasses the technical skills needed to navigate various digital platforms and tools, is increasingly recognized as essential for effective communication (Buckingham, 2007). However, digital media proficiency alone is not sufficient to fully engage with the complexities of today's media landscape. Media literacy, defined as the ability to

access, analyze, evaluate, create, and act using media (Cho et al., 2024), plays a crucial role in ensuring that individuals can not only use digital tools but also understand and critically assess the content they encounter and produce (Hobbs, 2010; Vissenberg & d'Haenens, 2024). By fostering both technical skills and critical thinking, media literacy ensures that students can analyze media representations, understand their societal impacts, and act responsibly in the digital world (Kirkland, 2021). This approach empowers individuals not just to use media but to engage with it in ways that are reflective and socially responsible (Wallis & Buckingham, 2019). Thus, while digital media proficiency enables individuals to access and utilize media tools, media literacy empowers them to critically reflect on and challenge the content they create and consume.

This study aims to explore the relationship between digital media proficiency and media literacy among communication students at the University of Sharjah. Specifically, it intends to assess the students' level of proficiency in digital media and examine how this proficiency influences their overall media literacy. By bridging the gap between technical skills and critical thinking, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how communication students are prepared to navigate the evolving digital media landscape. Through this investigation, the study highlights the importance of fostering both technical and critical skills in media education to ensure that students are equipped to succeed in a digitally driven world.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Digital Media Proficiency and Media Literacy

The digital age has transformed the way media is consumed and created, bringing with it the need for a new set of skills. For communication students, mastering both digital media proficiency and media literacy has become a crucial component of their education. While these concepts are often discussed separately, they are interlinked in their ability to prepare students for active and responsible participation in the digital world. Digital media proficiency is generally understood as the ability to use various digital tools and platforms effectively. This includes technical skills, such as the use of social media platforms, content management systems, multimedia production tools, and digital marketing strategies. As the digital world continues to expand, students in communication fields must be proficient in leveraging technology for communication, information sharing, and content creation. Research has highlighted the growing importance of these skills, as digital platforms play an integral role in shaping modern communication practices (Snoussi, 2024). Several scholars have examined the role of digital media proficiency in education, noting its importance for effective communication. Hobbs (2011) emphasizes the need for communication students to develop technical skills that are foundational for engaging with digital media. This proficiency enables students to participate in digital discourse, share content, and engage with diverse audiences across platforms. However, as digital tools become more sophisticated, the need for deeper, more critical engagement with media also grows. Digital media proficiency alone, while necessary, is insufficient for fostering a full understanding of the implications of media production and consumption in a digital environment (MediaSmarts, 2021).

As for Media literacy, the term refers to the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, create, and act using media. It extends beyond the simple act of using media tools and encompasses a critical approach to understanding and engaging with media content. According to Cho et al. (2024), media literacy involves the development of skills that allow individuals to assess the purpose, credibility, and ethical dimensions of media messages. It also requires an understanding of how media content is produced and the potential impact it has on audiences. Media literacy is crucial in a world where information is abundant and easily accessible, yet not always accurate or reliable. In the context of communication education, media literacy is often considered a core component of preparing students for the digital age. As Buckingham (2007) argues, media literacy is not just about the ability to use media tools, but about understanding how media shapes our perceptions of reality. In a similar vein, Hobbs (2012) underscores that media literacy must include the ability to critically engage with content, recognizing its biases, messages, and cultural implications. This kind of literacy is vital

for students who are expected to create, consume, and interpret media messages within the broader context of societal issues such as politics, economics, and culture.

As for the Relationship Between Digital Media Proficiency and Media Literacy, it has to be emphasized that while digital media proficiency and media literacy are often discussed separately, they are not mutually exclusive. In fact, the two concepts are complementary, with proficiency in digital tools laying the foundation for the critical thinking required for media literacy. Researchers have argued that effective communication in the digital age requires both technical competence and critical media engagement (Buckingham, 2007). For instance, students who are proficient in using digital platforms may still struggle to discern the ethical and social implications of the content they encounter or produce. This gap in knowledge highlights the need for media literacy to accompany technical proficiency. MediaSmarts (2021) notes that digital media literacy is not just about using technology but also understanding the role of technology in shaping societal values and individual behaviors. Media literacy equips students to reflect on how digital tools influence their communication practices and decisions. In turn, digital proficiency supports the creation of meaningful and informed media content, empowering students to contribute to digital discourse in a responsible way. This synergy between proficiency and literacy is essential for students who seek to thrive in a rapidly changing media environment (Snoussi, 2019). The integration of media literacy with digital proficiency also plays a crucial role in addressing challenges related to misinformation and digital ethics. As students become more skilled in navigating digital platforms, they must also be equipped with the tools to critically evaluate the media they engage with. In this regard, the relationship between digital media proficiency and media literacy is particularly significant. Students who lack media literacy may be more susceptible to misinformation and propaganda, as they may not have the tools to critically assess the content they consume (Hobbs, 2012). Therefore, fostering both digital media skills and critical thinking is essential for preparing students to navigate the complexities of today's media landscape.

Implications for Communication Education

Given the interdependence between digital media proficiency and media literacy, there are important implications for communication education. Scholars argue that the educational curriculum must evolve to integrate both technical training and critical media education. In a study by Hague and Williamson (2009), it was suggested that media literacy should be taught alongside digital skills to prepare students for the challenges of digital communication. This approach ensures that students are not only adept at using digital tools but also capable of engaging with media in a way that is reflective, ethical, and socially responsible.

Furthermore, digital media literacy programs should focus on the development of critical thinking skills. According to Cunliffe-Jones et al. (2021), students must be encouraged to question the media they consume, considering the commercial, political, and cultural forces at play. By fostering a more critical understanding of media, educators can help students become more discerning consumers and creators of content, thereby enabling them to navigate the digital landscape effectively.

Scholars confirm that the combination of digital media proficiency and media literacy is essential for communication students to succeed in the digital age. While proficiency in using digital tools is necessary, it is not sufficient on its own. Media literacy, which emphasizes critical thinking and ethical reflection, is equally important in enabling students to understand and engage with the media landscape. By integrating both proficiency and literacy into communication curricula, educators can ensure that students are prepared to navigate the complexities of digital media and engage in informed, responsible communication practices. As the digital media landscape continues to evolve, fostering these skills will be crucial for preparing students to be effective, ethical, and thoughtful communicators in an increasingly interconnected world.

This study raises the concern of bridging Digital Media Proficiency and Media Literacy in a special context: Communication students at the University of Sharjah (United Arab Emirates). The authors intend to explore how the digital media skills of communication students influence their ability to critically understand and

analyze media content, thereby examining the connection between digital media proficiency and media literacy. To answer, the main problem, three research questions are formulated as follows:

RQ1: What specific digital media skills are most strongly associated with higher levels of media literacy among communication students?

RQ2: To what extent do communication students at the University of Sharjah feel confident in applying their digital media skills to critically analyze media content?

Two hypotheses will be tested and verified:

Hypothesis 1: Communication students at the University of Sharjah possess an understanding of the requirements and skills necessary for effective digital media proficiency.

Hypothesis 2: There is a positive correlation between the factors that shape the technical knowledge of communication students at the University of Sharjah and their levels of media literacy.

The objectives of this study are centered on:

1. Assessing the level of digital media proficiency among communication students at the University of Sharjah;
2. Examining the understanding of digital media requirements and skills among communication students at the University of Sharjah;
3. Investigating the relationship between the factors that influence the technical knowledge of communication students at the University of Sharjah and their attitudes toward acquiring digital media skills.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The authors relied on the Cultivation Theory to explain how communication students at the University of Sharjah can acquire digital media skills and adopt the issues, trends, and ideas they wish to promote as communicators to enhance their digital skills. Cultivation Theory is an applied framework for ideas related to the processes of meaning construction, the shaping of social realities, and learning through observation, highlighting the role of digital media in these areas. The general idea behind this theory emphasizes the ability of media to influence individuals' knowledge and perceptions of the world around them, particularly for those who are heavily exposed to these media. Therefore, this theory links the intensity of acquiring meanings, ideas, beliefs, and symbolic images about the world presented by digital media with the real or actual world (Ismail, 2023).

METHOD

This study employs a quantitative approach, utilizing a survey tool to collect data. The sample comprises 285 respondents, selected randomly from a total of 1,038 students enrolled in the College of Communication during the Fall 2024 semester, representing approximately 27.45% of the student population during that period.

This study follows a quantitative approach, utilizing a survey tool for data collection. The study population consists of students from the College of Communication at the University of Sharjah, with a total of 1,100 students enrolled during the Fall 2024 semester. The sample for analysis and observation was drawn randomly from this population, with 285 respondents selected based on the sample size table from Sekaran & Bougie (2016), ensuring an acceptable margin of error of 5%. This represents approximately 27.45% of the student population.

Study Tool, Validity, and Reliability

A questionnaire was specifically designed for this study to achieve its objectives, containing a number of closed-ended questions. To assess its validity, the questionnaire was reviewed by expert panelists, including

professors from Arab and Emirati universities specialized in Media studies and Statistics. Suggested revisions were implemented. The reliability test was conducted using the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient, which resulted in a value of 86%.

Statistical Analysis and Data Collection

The study employed various statistical techniques, including the mean, frequencies, percentages, standard deviation, and the One Sample t-test for binary comparisons, to test the hypotheses. Data collection comprised both secondary and primary data. Secondary data was sourced from specialized journals, scientific publications, media-related books, and materials pertinent to digital media. Primary data was gathered through a field study using a structured questionnaire administered to the selected sample.

FINDINGS

Digital Media Skills Strongly Associated with Higher Levels of Media Literacy Among Communication Students (RQ1)

The primary focus of the survey is to assess the level of digital media skills possessed by students at the College of Communication at the University of Sharjah. The table below summarizes the results.

Table (1): Factors Enhancing Digital Media Skills Acquisition in the UOS College of Communication

Level of Importance	Rank	Standard Deviation	Mean	Items
Medium	5	0.8151	3.660	Digital transformation is being leveraged to raise awareness and educate students on acquiring digital media skills.
High	1	0.7459	3.913	The university has initiatives to equip students in the College of Communication with the necessary skills for dealing with digital media.
High	3	0.8002	3.749	The College of Communication provides sufficient information to enhance students' skills in handling digital media.
High	2	0.7570	3.857	Students identify strengths and weaknesses in programs that support digital media skills acquisition.
Medium	6	0.7746	3.634	Students play a role in mitigating the impact of variables that affect their acquisition of digital media skills.
High	4	0.7625	3.702	The college provides students with information that contributes to increasing their skills in dealing with digital media.
High			**3.752**	Overall Mean

Table 1 shows that the mean score for digital media skills among communication students at the University of Sharjah was 3.752, indicating a high level of proficiency. The highest mean (3.913) was for the item stating that the university is focused on equipping students with the necessary digital media skills. The lowest mean (3.634) was for the item regarding students' role in mitigating the impact of variables on their digital media skill acquisition. The standard deviations were low, suggesting that responses from the sample were consistent.

The second question aims to assess the extent to which communication students at the University of Sharjah have a clear understanding of the requirements and skills necessary to engage with digital media. The results are gathered in Table 2.

Table (2): Key Factors Influencing UOS College of Communication Students' Engagement with Digital Media

Level of Importance	Score	Standard Deviation	Mean	Item	Rank
Medium	6	0.7813	3.529	Planning digital transformation programs in the college plays an important role in the success of students' efforts in dealing with digital media	1
High	3	0.6961	3.773	Students contribute to the success of laws and regulations promoting digital media engagement	2
High	2	0.6717	3.796	Students recognize the importance of implementing programs related to digital media engagement	3
Medium	5	0.7566	3.641	Planning digital transformation programs motivates students to engage with digital media	4
High	1	0.6610	3.811	Students understand the importance of communicating information about digital transformation and digital media engagement	5
High	4	0.7785	3.767	Students are fully and adequately knowledgeable in dealing with digital media	6
High			**3.719**	Overall Mean	

The mean score of 3.719 shown in the table above, reflects a strong understanding among students at the UOS College of Communication, regarding digital media skills and requirements. The responses ranged from 3.811 to 3.529, with the highest mean (3.811) for the statement on the importance of conveying information about digital transformation and digital media engagement. The lowest mean (3.529) was for the statement on the role of digital transformation program planning in student success. The low standard deviations suggest that responses were consistent across the sample.

The authors chose to assess in the third question the correlational relationship between the factors influencing the formation of technical knowledge among students at the College of Communication, University of Sharjah, and their actual attitudes toward acquiring digital media skills. This question explores how various factors, such as digital transformation programs and access to relevant information, affect students' understanding and engagement with digital media skills. The results indicate a significant relationship between these factors, suggesting that students' technical knowledge is closely linked to their attitudes and preparedness to develop digital media competencies. The results are as follows:

Table (3): Digital Transformation Programs and Their Impact on Students' Digital Media Skills at the UOS College of Communication

Level of Importance	Score	Standard Deviation	Mean	Items
High	3	0.7611	3.758	Digital transformation programs aimed at equipping students with digital media skills are persuasive and well-received.
High	4	0.7512	3.724	The content of digital transformation programs focused on acquiring digital media skills meets my needs and desires.
High	1	0.7320	3.827	Digital transformation programs help shape my opinion on various issues requiring digital media skills.
Medium	5	0.7708	3.643	The topics covered in digital transformation programs on digital media align with my interests.
Medium	6	0.7788	3.540	Digital transformation programs influence my behavioral patterns in dealing with digital media.
High	2	0.7810	3.794	The digital transformation programs offered on digital media are suitable for me.
High			**3.714**	Overall Mean

The analysis revealed a high mean score of 3.714, reflecting a significant relationship between the factors influencing the development of technical knowledge among students at the UOS College of Communication, and their actual attitudes toward acquiring digital media skills. The mean scores for this question ranged from 3.827 to 3.540. The statement "Digital transformation programs help shape students' opinions on various issues requiring digital media skills" had the highest mean score of 3.827. In contrast, the statement "Digital transformation programs influence students' behavioral patterns in dealing with digital media" had the lowest mean score of 3.540. The low standard deviations suggest that the responses from the study sample were relatively close and consistent.

Testing the Study Hypotheses

A One-Sample t-test was used to test the study hypotheses. The rule states: "The hypothesis is accepted if the calculated t-value is greater than the tabulated t-value." Based on this rule, the tests were conducted, and the results are presented in the following tables:

The testing results of the first hypothesis (Communication students at the University of Sharjah possess an understanding of the requirements and skills necessary for effective digital media proficiency), is summarized in table 4.

Table (4): T-test Results for Digital Media Skills Among UOS College of Communication Students

Variable	Calculated t-value	Tabulated t-value	Sig-t (P-value)	Statistical Decision
Communication students at the University of Sharjah possess an understanding of the requirements and skills necessary for effective digital media proficiency.	25.608	1.658	0.000	Accept the hypothesis

The table 4 shows the results of the T-test for the hypothesis that students at the College of Communication, University of Sharjah, possess digital media skills. The calculated t-value of 25.608 exceeds the tabulated t-value of 1.658, and the significance level (Sig.) is 0.000. Since the Sig. value is well below the standard threshold of 0.05, we can reject the null hypothesis and accept the alternative hypothesis. This indicates that students at the College of Communication, University of Sharjah, indeed possess digital media skills at a statistically significant level.

The second hypothesis stipulates that there is a positive correlation between the factors that shape the technical knowledge of communication students at the University of Sharjah and their levels of media literacy. The results are indicated in Table 5.

Table (5): T-test Results for Students' Understanding of Digital Media Skills and Requirements at the UOS College of Communication

Variable	Calculated t-value	Tabulated t-value	Sig-t (P-value)	Statistical Decision
the factors that shape the technical knowledge of communication students at the University of Sharjah and their levels of media literacy.	23.601	1.658	0.000	Accept the hypothesis

The results presented in the table 5 indicate a significant correlation between the factors influencing the development of technical knowledge and the actual attitudes of students at the College of Communication, University of Sharjah, toward acquiring digital media skills. The calculated t-value of 23.601 far exceeds the tabulated t-value of 1.658, and the significance level (Sig.) is 0.000, which is well below the standard threshold of 0.05. This strong statistical significance supports the hypothesis that the factors shaping students' technical knowledge are closely linked to their attitudes toward digital media skills. In other words, students' understanding and acquisition of technical knowledge in the digital media field influence their attitudes and confidence in applying these skills in real-world contexts.

The results suggest that media literacy is relatively high among the students, indicating that the students are not only gaining the necessary technical skills but also have a positive attitude toward applying them. This alignment between knowledge and attitude is a key aspect of media literacy, which involves both understanding and critically engaging with media content. Thus, the strong relationship found in the data could imply that students at the College of Communication, University of Sharjah, have a high level of media literacy, as they demonstrate both the skills and the mindset needed to effectively navigate and analyze digital media.

Confidence of Communication Students at the University of Sharjah in Applying Digital Media Skills for Critical Media Analysis (RQ2)

Data show that communication students at the University of Sharjah likely feel confident in applying their digital media skills to critically analyze media content, although this conclusion is indirectly drawn. The information retrieved from the participants confirm the followings:

1. **Digital Media Skills Proficiency**: The results show that students at the UOS College of Communication have a high level of proficiency in digital media skills, as evidenced by the high mean scores for items related to the university's efforts to equip students with necessary digital media skills and the students' understanding of the importance of digital media engagement.
2. **Correlation between Knowledge and Attitudes**: The significant correlation between the factors influencing technical knowledge and students' attitudes toward acquiring digital media skills further suggests that students have a strong foundation of knowledge. This implies they likely feel more confident in using their skills critically, particularly since positive attitudes toward digital media engagement were also noted.
3. **Confidence in Application**: The high proficiency levels and positive attitudes toward digital media imply a high likelihood that students feel prepared and confident in applying their skills in a critical context, such as analyzing media content.

DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSION

To answer RQ1 regarding the specific digital media skills most strongly associated with higher levels of media literacy among communication students, the data indicates that communication students at the University of Sharjah exhibit high proficiency in digital media skills, with a mean score of 3.752. This suggests strong capabilities in digital media literacy, with particular emphasis on acute evaluation, communication of digital transformation information, and engagement with digital media tools. The highest mean score of 3.913 reflects the students' recognition of the university's focus on equipping them with the necessary digital media skills, a key factor contributing to their media literacy. These findings are aligned with studies by Hobbs (2010) who has emphasized the importance of students' abilities to use, analyze, and create media, which are key indicators of higher levels of media literacy. He has developed frameworks for measuring digital media competencies, focusing on how media literacy can be applied to understand and critically evaluate media content. In the same vein, Paul Mihailidis (2014) underscores that media literacy is essential for informed and engaged citizenship. His research supports your findings on how digital media skills not only increase media literacy but also contribute to the development of critical thinking, which is necessary for navigating today's media landscape.

For RQ2, regarding the extent to which communication students at the University of Sharjah feel confident in applying their digital media skills to analytically evaluate media content, the data suggests that students are highly confident. With a mean score of 3.719, it is evident that students not only understand the requirements of digital media but also recognize the importance of digital transformation in their education. Specifically, they exhibit a strong ability to form opinions on media-related issues requiring digital media skills, as reflected in the highest mean score of 3.827. This suggests that students are well-equipped to critically engage with and analyze media content. The low standard deviations further imply that the majority of students share this high level of confidence in their digital media proficiency. In their 2023 work, Kellner and Share argue that the intersection of media literacy and digital culture presents a crucial opportunity for education to evolve. They emphasize the need to approach media literacy not just as a tool for understanding media texts but as a mechanism for addressing social issues through the lens of critical pedagogy. By integrating cultural studies and critical media literacy (CML), they advocate for teaching students to analyze media's power structures and the ways in which representations influence societal norms, such as issues of race, gender, and class. According to them, it is not merely about understanding media content but about empowering individuals to engage in more active and critical citizenship in a digital

world. Similarly, **Fastrez, P., & Landry, N. (2023)** explore research methods for evaluating media literacy, discussing various frameworks for assessing how digital competencies contribute to media literacy. Their focus on systematic evaluation aligns with the approach of this study, which investigates students' proficiency in digital media and their ability to critically analyze media content. Like in this study, Fastrez and Landry's work offers valuable insights into how media literacy can be comprehensively measured within an educational context, providing a framework for understanding digital media skills in relation to critical thinking and analysis.

In conclusion, this study underscores the critical connection between digital media proficiency and confidence in analyzing media content, aligning with broader research on media literacy education. The findings highlight the pivotal role of fostering digital competencies in enhancing students' ability to critically engage with media. This study reaffirms that integrating media literacy into educational contexts equips students not only with technical skills but also with the critical thinking necessary to navigate and interpret the complexities of digital media landscapes. These insights emphasize the ongoing need for robust media literacy initiatives to prepare students for informed and reflective participation in the digital age.

Further studies involving a broader sample from the region are essential to provide a more conclusive understanding of students' confidence and competence in critical media analysis.

Authors' Contributions

TS translated the data from Arabic to English, drafted the paper, designed the tables, edited the reference list and the whole manuscript to address the major revisions. **OJ** drafted the literature review, participated in the design of the research, designed the questionnaire, conducted the survey, and participated in the statistical analysis. All authors read and approved the final manuscript

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The authors declare no conflicts.

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